



Sexuality, power and the sociology of the internet

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Abstract

The internet is an increasingly important enabler and mediator of sexual relations in society. It has begun to transform older modes of knowing, experiencing and organizing sexuality. In light of an emerging social science literature, this article considers internet-mediated sexuality and its consequences for theorizing power. It looks at three ideal typical strands of power in relation to sexuality: the constitutive, the regulatory and the unequal. It considers empirically based discussions alongside broader theoretical concerns: Foucauldian work on discourse and subjectivity, an Althusserian account of interpellation, the symbolic interactionist focus on the presentation of self and feminist analyses of inequality. On the internet, the article suggests, the overlaps between different forms of sexual power are often complex and multi-directional.

Keywords

Facebook, gender, internet, power, sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality is everywhere on the internet, and its exemplars seem endless. There is a vast array of pornography, downloadable films, music and TV clips with sexual content and advertising for sexual products and services. Some websites offer sexual health information, others provide forums for political discussion and activism, and confessional sites tell stories of pleasure, suffering and personal transformation. The internet is for browsing, learning, dating and friend-making, and simply for diverting us from the myriad tasks of everyday life.

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The academic literature in the area is increasingly comprehensive. There are analyses of the internet's growing importance in postmodern life, and micro-level analyses of particular sites and situated practices. Identities and gendered dynamics in digital space, cyberbullying, home-made pornography and sex lives on Second Life are all examples (Boellstorff, 2008, Ch. 6; Brookey and Cannon, 2009; Hardey, 2002; Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Ray, 2007: Ch. 4; Van Zoonen, 2002; Zhao, 2006).

Questions of sexuality and the internet in relation to social power, however, have been addressed only implicitly and unsystematically. While much of the existing academic literature discusses the exercise and effects of power in passing, authors tend not to address the matter directly. Even where power is central to the academic enterprise – in work on gendered representations, inequality and exploitation, for instance – it is rarely named as such, or theorized explicitly (see, for example, Albury, 2009; Brookey and Cannon, 2009). Ross, who explores 'doing and being' in relation to internet sexuality, provides one exception. As a property, he writes, power 'may reside in the individual's ability to change form, age, gender, position, or sexual orientation' in relatively anonymous digital spaces. Ross adds that power inflects the sexual scripts we use online (Ross, 2005: 343–4). This is a promising beginning, but still power remains evanescent and only partly explored.

In this article I offer a framework for systematically thinking about power in relation to sexuality and the internet. DiMaggio et al. encourage sociologists to synthesize existing research findings in order to further our understanding of the internet's social influence (DiMaggio et al., 2001). In taking up their challenge, I seek to tease out the complexities of power's operation in the academic literature to date. Even though many of these works do not explicitly name power in relation to sexuality, their examples can be used to explore power's expression and operation, and to push the debate forward. I draw on several theoretical perspectives: Foucauldian work on discourse and subjectivity; an Althusserian account of interpellation; symbolic interactionist writings on the presentation of self in social situations; and feminist analyses of sexual inequality. These perspectives diverge at some points and converge in others, but each offers useful insights within the broader framework.

We can, I suggest, explore power and sexuality across several dimensions (Brickell, 2009). As a set of forces, power *constitutes* the meanings we give to the sexual world, the ways we live those meanings in internet life and the ways we put together our identities. Power is also *regulatory*. Institutionally located along a range of scales, it enables, constrains and moulds our engagements with sexuality on the internet. Third, power is an agent of *inequality*. It directs the flow of internet sexuality in ways that privilege some actors and groups, and marginalize or dominate others. These different dimensions of power do not play out in isolation. To explore them together is to account for their intersections and overlaps, to see how each of power's strands builds upon the others. To see power in this way is to stitch particular examples into their broader, multidimensional binding, while simultaneously allowing us to focus on the particularities of power's operation.

The following sections explore each dimension of power in relation to sexuality and the internet. They combine insights from the existing academic literature with some observations of my own. The article's final section explores some of the ways the different dimensions of power intermesh and overlap in the online world.

Power as a constitutive force

More and more often, the internet is a key site in which subjectivities are constructed. Internet spaces, and the social practices embedded in them, constitute social life, including our subjectivities (Crampton, 2003: 3). We become who we are, at least in part, through our interactions in these kinds of spaces. When it comes to sexuality, internet researchers might profitably consider what kinds of relationships, connections and communities are produced, enabled and encouraged in this particular field of social life.

This is partly a Foucauldian enquiry. In Michel Foucault's estimation, power is a set of forces that establishes modes of being and governs conduct. It operates upon and through us 'from below' to create our position in the social world (Danaher et al., 2000: 48). Foucault memorably described power as constitutive rather than repressive when he wrote that '“Sexuality” is far more of a positive product of power than power was ever repression of sexuality' (Foucault, 1980: 120). As an increasingly significant generator and rearticulator of linguistic and symbolic systems – discourses, in Foucault's terms – internet practices 'form the objects of which [they] speak' (Foucault, 2002 [1972]: 54).

Many internet spaces help us to constitute ourselves as social subjects. To some degree we become our pages on Facebook, MySpace and anywhere else we announce our presence to an online audience. As we establish and embellish our profiles, we build ourselves out of the raw matter of everyday life and the architecture of the site in question: photographs, social relationships, text boxes, quotations and online ephemera. We construct subjectivity as we navigate the discourses available to us through these sites. If subjectivity is always in process, these kinds of websites play an important part in our ongoing self-shaping.

In terms of intimacy and sexuality in particular, internet dating sites provide useful examples. Such sites are now well established (see Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Ellison et al., 2006; Ray, 2007). Some have a global reach and target a diverse audience. 'Adultfriendfinder.com', for instance, claims over 32 million members, and 'craigslist.com' offers dating options alongside a range of other community services (job vacancies, housing and finance). Other examples are more specialized: 'gay.com' and 'lesbotronic.com' are targeted at gay and lesbian web surfers, and 'alt.com' addresses those interested in 'BDSM, leather and fetish'. The tagline of 'ashleymadison.com' reveals that site's particular appeal: 'Life is short: have an affair'. On all of these sites, members' profiles contain statistical and descriptive fields – age, height, body type, interests, the characteristics sought in a romantic or sexual partner – and there is usually space for a photograph (Smaill, 2004). Other members get in touch, and express their interest by instant message or email.

To participate in these forums is to engage with constitutive power in particular ways. The moment we step into any of these sites, we engage in numerous, socially circulating discourses of romance and sexual attraction, first as observers and then as creators of our own profiles. We construct ourselves – and others – using the language our culture has coded in specific, highly symbolic ways: 'caring', 'genuine', 'hot', 'athletic' and so on. In part, at least, we are constituted from below – 'formed as objects' – through the discourses that define us on and through these sites. This constitutive moment can be highly pleasurable, a matter of empowered becoming. As Foucault suggested, power creates pleasure as well as subjectivity (McWhorter, 1999).

The insights of French theorist Louis Althusser are also useful here. The state interpellates its subjects into discourse by hailing them, Althusser suggests, much as a policeman might hail the bystander with the call of 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser, 2008 [1971]: 48). The dating site also interpellates its participants in a range of ways, calling them into being in the process. This interpellation occurs partly at a structural level. Dating sites offer preset grids – 'I am/I am looking for; Likes/Dislikes' – into which we insert aspects of ourselves. The site's very architecture calls us into being; it constitutes us as online dater subjects. The injunctions that circulate within these sites' micro-society also interpellate us. Modes of interpellation can be negative ('No game-players/time-wasters/mutants'; 'If you're not hot you're wasting my time') or positive: 'Looking for bad girls (boys)/geeks/open-minded/friendly'. Such power-laden statements force us to consider whether or not we have the qualities demanded by others, and to ask a series of questions: 'Is that me?'; 'Am I the one hailed here?'; and, ultimately 'Who *am* I?' and 'Who do I want to become?' As we recognize – or fail to recognize – ourselves in such moments, power structures our internet engagements.

Symbolic interactionism is increasingly influential in internet scholarship (Earle and Sharp, 2007; Ellison et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2008), and this perspective offers further insights into the constitutive process.¹ Symbolic interactionists ask how people present themselves within particular 'interaction orders', that is, domains of social interchange governed by particular rules and conditions (Goffman, 1959, 1983; Hardey, 2002). The symbolic interactionist self is reflective and interactive, not static or overdetermined, and subjectivity is actively negotiated in a range of spaces – including digital ones. Subjects manage impressions of themselves in the presence of others, and conduct themselves in ways that demonstrate their competence within an interaction order. By manipulating photos, text and chat, subjects try to obey those 'corporeal rules' that allow them to 'come across as credible' (Waskul, 2004: 85). Even if online daters 'stretch the truth a bit' – by displaying photos which hide or accentuate particular physical features, for instance – they must maintain a good overall impression (Zhao et al., 2008: 1819).

Of course, the dating site is not the only location for these kinds of processes. Participants on Facebook 'engage in identity constructions' and 'present their hoped-for possible selves' by accentuating some aspects of their lives and glossing over others (Zhao et al., 2008: 1821). On Facebook we create our sexualized selves more subtly than we might on a dating profile, by combining basic parameters – 'sex/interested in [men, women or both]/relationship status', for instance – and other elements: status updates and quizzes with identity-constructing content ('what gay stereotype are you?'/ 'what kind of girlfriend are you?'). We also construct and convey our sexual selves by displaying photograph 'albums' featuring partners/friends/family members, drunken nights out and risqué pictures snapped in public or private places. Those who wish to convey a specific sexual identity can do so. They may be simultaneously enabled and limited by the architectural factors of the website, the material circumstances of their lives and the impressions formed by cyberspace's other inhabitants.

As these examples demonstrate, websites can offer valuable spaces of possibility. Of young gay men in Japan, for instance, McLelland writes:

... many young men's debuts on the scene occur not in bars but via the Internet, a medium that not only gives access to an unlimited amount of information about the gay world but also, equally

important, allows individuals to voice their own identities. On the Internet, young men are able to encounter the gay world and begin to communicate with others *as gay men* while still in their teens – something that was almost impossible previously. (McLelland, 2005: 185–6)

For these men, the internet is a space for ‘expansive realization’, where they can become what they understand themselves to be, set apart – if only temporarily – from the restrictions on offline identities. The personal home page is important, McLelland suggests, as a site in which ‘Japanese gay men come out and discourse about their positionality as gay men’ (McLelland, 2005: 187). To constitute oneself in this way, and to make the most of the internet’s highly networked character, is to be empowered in one’s subject position. Hillier and Harrison make a similar point, when they suggest that internet chat rooms encourage young gay and lesbian Australians to ‘try on’ and ‘test out’ sexual identities (Hillier and Harrison, 2007). This ‘testing’ cuts both ways. Some internet users may commit to minority sexual identities in real time and space, while others ultimately decide against it. On the internet, we can ‘try before we buy’, adopting some subject positions and declining others.

The internet is an important resource for those wishing to locate relevant legal and medical knowledge in the field of sexuality (Bryson, 2004; Kanuga and Rosenfeld, 2004). These knowledges and their expressions, however, are far from epistemologically neutral. Instead, as Foucault reminds us, ‘effects of power circulate within scientific statements’ (Foucault, 1980: 112). As a genre, the sexual health information website clearly illustrates this point. While these types of sites are much less interactive than online chat rooms, they offer up a range of closely linked discourses that constitute sexual subjectivity in particular ways. The New Zealand Ministry of Health’s ‘hubba.co.nz’, for example, was aimed at teenagers. Featuring the catchy slogan ‘No rubba, no hubba hubba’ – referring to slang for condoms and sex respectively – it offered ‘tips about sex and having safer sex’. Online until its withdrawal early in 2010, the website offered these kinds of statements:

Lots of people are gay, lesbian and bisexual (i.e. that girl down the road, my bro, your doctor, Ellen Degeneres, your friend, that super spunk on TV, the waitress in that café) – all of them are happy, strong, on to it people who have the right to love.

If someone is telling you they love you and pressuring you at the same time, then they don’t know what love is. Having sex might make you feel older but it won’t make you more mature, change who you really are, or mean that someone will stay with you.

Deciding when you’re ready to have sex is probably one of the hardest decisions you’ll make. Maybe that’s why a lot of people act before they think, or get wasted to avoid thinking it through. There is one sure thing though – it is always your decision. No one else should make it for you.

‘Hubba.co.nz’ provided for its teenage readers a framework for thinking about sex. Under the overarching theme of ‘rights’, ‘hubba.co.nz’ offered a narrative of same-sex desire, diversity and acceptance. The second excerpt melds the desire for personal empowerment, an appeal to maturity and an ideal of ‘true love’, while the third stresses sexual autonomy. These texts are all resources for subjectivity; discourses that young people will negotiate – and may adopt, modify or reject – as they piece together their understandings

of what sex is, and what it means to them. At the same time, the website's authors inscribed particular knowledges as truths to be assimilated: gay and lesbian citizens are happy members of a sizeable sexual minority; love and pressure are mutually exclusive; sexual autonomy is important. In yoking together the terms 'rubba' and 'hubba hubba', the website's tagline also conflated sexual activity in general and penetrative sex in particular, thus reinforcing the notion that 'real' sex is penetrative. This website ordered these discursive positions in particular ways, and disseminated them to an online audience. Its 'internal régime[s] of power' appeared to fade into the background, by constituting the truth of sex in a given moment (Foucault, 1980: 112).

As all these examples show, the productive power of the internet has several facets. Some sites – like 'hubba.co.nz' – mediate and transmit a range of possibilities for sexual knowledge, all the while privileging particular discourses over others. Their audiences are expected to incorporate these discourses into their sexual subjectivities. Other websites – dating sites, chat rooms and Facebook, for instance – encourage a more interactive approach to the presentation and fashioning of sexuality. In symbolic interactionist terms, all of these locations can be seen as 'interaction orders' in which rules and expectations help to constitute subjectivity. Each location affords opportunities for the active, repeated and ongoing constitution of sexual individuals.

The regulatory aspects of power

'Never before have so many people had such easy access to so much sexually explicit material', Dennis Waskul suggests. '[F]rom the comfort of one's own home and under a dense veil of anonymity, an enormous range of sex is readily available at one's fingertips – and no one is embarrassingly exposed for their curious cyberpeepings' (Waskul, 2004: 4). While Waskul makes a valuable point, this is hardly an unimpeded flow of information. Internet sexuality is widely accessible, but it is also subject to regulation. This takes place on several different levels, or – to use a geographical metaphor – up and down several scales (Brenner, 2005: 9): from individual conduct, to household practices, to the rules of institutional settings and the overarching purview of the state. Starting with the individual subject, this section explores the regulatory aspects of power in relation to sexuality on the web.

Foucault noted that the subject constituted through power relations is never free from the constraints of context. Instead, he suggested, to become a subject is to be subjected to the network of power that infuses every corner of society. In this account, the subject learns to regulate him or herself with respect to the expectations of the wider society, and he or she interiorizes this regulation (Danaher et al., 2000: 49). This is governmentality: an 'art and science' that operates through customs, habits and reflexive ways of thinking and acting, and through which subjects learn to govern themselves (Foucault, 1991). The health advice that produces sexual knowledge has a strong governmental aspect, combining liberal discourses of self with remonstrations about 'risky' behaviours (Ryan, 2005). 'Your partner may have a number of reasons for not using a condom', 'hubba.co.nz' reminds its readers, 'but none is worth the risk of getting an STI or falling pregnant'.

In the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's model prison, prisoners' backlit cells faced a louvered central guard tower that convicts could not see into (Foucault, 1995 [1977]: 200–9). As prisoners could not tell whether or not the guard was watching at any particular

moment, they learned to check their own behaviour. Foucault used Bentham's design as a metaphor for modern surveillance, and it speaks clearly to the practice of internet sexuality. Backlit in their profile boxes, online daters are observed by others through the louvres of their websites' search engines. Unlike Bentham's example, however, these prisoners are willing participants. This is a seductive panopticon of a sort that Vannini calls a 'synopticon', where 'the distinction between surveyors and surveyed . . . can become quite blurry' (Vannini, 2004: 83). The process is a deeply ambiguous one. Daters project their own desires through their profiles, and want their profiles to be looked at and appreciated by others on the site. Nevertheless, they usually cannot tell when they are being watched, and nor can they gauge what impression others may have gained from their profile. To post a profile is to create, present, project and regulate oneself simultaneously, in the hope of a positive outcome.

Regulatory power spirals up another level, too, where money is involved. Users usually have to pay to access the advanced features of many websites. On porn sites, payment allows access to entire movies, not just disjointed clips; on current affairs websites viewers must pay to respond to news stories or access archives (Campbell, 2007: 199). Money also alters the dynamics of surveillance. A paid-up membership on New Zealand networking site 'nzdating.com', for instance, allows users to see which other members are online in any given moment, and identify those who have recently viewed their profile. In this respect, paid-up subscribers gain a better view into the watch tower. Yet, when we submit ourselves to the 'inspection process of registration', and provide our credit card details, we ultimately become more – not less – accountable (Campbell, 2007: 199). Money affords us greater access to the gaze of others, and, at the same time, increases our exposure to surveillance.

While regulatory power is exercised at the level of individual subjectivity and online experience, it also descends 'from above'. Researchers and other commentators often ask who ought to govern and regulate cyberspace, in relation to controls on content and access in particular (Mayer-Schönberger, 2002/3: 610). As Mayer-Schönberger points out, some argue the state ought to regulate content and access, some think these ought to occupy the domain of international law and others advocate self-regulation through due care and 'netiquette' (net etiquette). Still others suggest the internet is a new social frontier, and can – and must – be separated from the regulatory regimes of already existing societies.

As the internet transcends national boundaries, state control can be difficult. Some administrations have nevertheless attempted to regulate online spaces. The governments of Iran, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Myanmar and Yemen, for instance, require that internet service providers (ISPs) block 'pornographic websites' and politically dissident content (Deibert and Villeneuve, 2004: 121–2). During the mid-1990s, some states explored the possibility of prosecuting people whose hard drives contained forbidden files. The Singaporean government, for example, held internet users and providers 'legally responsible for keeping pornographic and politically objectionable material off the Internet' (Knoll, 1995/6: 294). In Althusserian terms, these initiatives reveal the role of the 'repressive state apparatus': those elements of the state with the power to punish transgressors (Althusser, 2008 [1971]: 16–17).

More recently, in Australia, the federal government proposed a scheme called 'Clean Feed'. This would introduce mandatory ISP-level filtering of material 'refused classification' by the government's Classification Board. This consists primarily of X-rated films,

depictions of child sex abuse and sites promoting illegal drug use, all deemed likely to 'offend against the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults' (Graycar and Morgan, 2002: 404). Opponents, represented on the protest site 'nocleanfeed.com', argue the legislation severely curtails legitimate freedom of expression, especially where X-rated films are concerned. At the time of writing, in late 2011, the legislation's final form is still uncertain.

While the state is an important agent of institutionalized regulatory power, it is not the only one. 'Content blocking' occurs locally too, in a wide range of spaces: internet cafes, schools and workplaces, to name three (Deibert and Villeneuve, 2004; Lawson and Comber, 2000; Whitty, 2004). Content blocking takes several forms. Text-based filtering blocks access to websites containing specified words ('pornography', 'penis'); black-list filtering bars those sites specified by systems administrators; and white-list filtering allows access only to stipulated sites (Laughlin, 2002/3: 272–5). Sometimes these filters 'overblock', denying access to a greater number or range of websites than was originally intended. For example, a text-based filter may misidentify gay and lesbian activist or information sites as pornographic. Willard (2002) argues that some of these systems – especially those used in public schools in the USA – were developed by companies with evangelical Christian connections, and filter content according to conservative principles.

As the latter example suggests, the power to regulate internet access may be hotly contested. Internet access on public and school library computers has been a contentious topic. Some advocate the use of filtering systems – especially those blocking access to pornography – in an attempt to prevent sexual harassment of library workers. Others disagree, and argue that filters represent a latter day 'book banning' (Laughlin, 2002/3). The implications of this debate are weighty, as the power to regulate may be far-reaching in its consequences. A public library blocking system may prevent a gay or lesbian teenager, for instance, or a woman contemplating an abortion, from accessing information about local support networks.

At a lower level still, the household is another site of regulatory forms of power. Popular 'net nanny'-type products block access to unwanted internet content (Knoll, 1995/6: 288). These interventions draw upon and reinscribe parental authority over children. Indeed, many such products are customizable, and allow parental authority to be finely modulated according to guardians' belief systems. A number of Christian examples are available. 'Safe Eyes' content control software promises to 'Protect yourself and your family from pornography and predators', while 'WiseChoice' is targeted at 'adults trying to stay away from pornography, to protect marriages and reputations'. The marketers outline its benefits:

[The] WiseChoice Porn Filter cannot be turned off or changed by the user at their computer – to remove this version, the primary customer must call our office and personally request changes or removal – if the wife is the customer then the husband cannot remove the filter. Even better, if someone attempts to erase the filters by deleting files it will kick them completely off the net until it is re-installed – Busted! (www.wisechoice.net/forchristians)

In this kind of scenario, the adult controller can regulate his or her children's internet behaviour and that of their spouse as well. There is another dimension here, too. As the term 'Busted!' reveals, humiliation – threatened or exercised – is a further mode of regulation.

The power relations circulating within families – between adults as well as between adults and children – extend to the computer and the world available through it.

Power and inequality

The internet seems a world apart from our everyday material lives in some respects, an escape through a screen into an alternative reality. As a social product and a site of social interactions, though, the internet is tightly tied into the dynamics of the everyday. Much like any other sphere of social life, the internet's representations and practices operate along several axes of social stratification. Many authors have already pointed out that the web is heavily gendered and racialized (Adam, 2002; Stokes, 2007; Van Zoonen, 2002). More specifically, inequalities between men and women, and between people from different ethnic groups, play out in the realm of internet sexuality too.

Pornography has long been a contentious topic in feminist writings on gendered power, and its internet instantiations are no less troubled. Catharine MacKinnon has long argued that pornography can be harmful to women, and she writes of internet pornography's ability to cross new boundaries, open new markets and 'pioneer new harms'. MacKinnon argues that 'Pornography in cyberspace is pornography in society, just broader, deeper, worse, and more of it' (MacKinnon, 1995: 1959). She adds: 'electronically communicated pornography trafficks women in a yet more sophisticated form' (1995: 1959). MacKinnon's argument suggests that internet pornography replicates existing power relations in society, and that global internet networks extend power's reach even further.

Other scholars agree that the material context of internet sexuality ought not to be elided.² Mireille Miller-Young's recent study suggests there are substantial disparities of income between black and white porn actresses. Black actresses, she finds, frequently earn 50 percent less income than their white counterparts, for the same kinds of work (Miller-Young, 2010: 227). There are non-monetary disparities too. For instance, a slim, white femininity is maintained as the standard all actresses must follow:

The rule tends to be: live up to the requirements of white sexual embodiment, in other words, assimilate to white beauty standards, or risk being ghettoized in the most undervalued sectors of the business, such as the low-end genre of 'ghetto porn'. (Miller-Young, 2010: 228)

Kath Albury agrees that pornographic representations cannot be divorced from the conditions of their making, but her stance is rather more optimistic than MacKinnon's or Miller-Young's. She suggests that pornographic websites – like other genres of porn – are 'reflections of cultural currents that include both radical and regressive understandings of sex and gender' (Albury, 2009: 652). While 'some sexually explicit texts eroticize misogyny', Albury suggests, others lend themselves to more transgressive readings (2009: 649–50). What really matters is whether porn is 'produced and consumed in an ethical context', and that those involved are fully aware, agreeable and fully compensated (2009: 651).

Despite their differences, MacKinnon, Albury and Miller-Young all agree that the internet reflects and refracts broader patterns of social power and that internet pornography cannot sidestep the material conditions of its production. Still, there is the possibility that the dynamics of inequality can be resisted by making pornography in more critically engaged

ways. Ray documents the female porn-makers who offer 'woman-friendly' material to a rapidly expanding female audience (Ray, 2007: Ch. 4). Some of Miller-Young's black female actresses have become directors, and seek to 'highlight the erotic power and beauty of the women in the images' while sustaining an ethical working environment for their co-workers (Miller-Young, 2010: 230).

Porn sites are not the only online spaces structured by inequality and resistance. Sexual harassment and cyberstalking are other areas of concern (Adam, 2002; Barak, 2005). Unwanted sexual solicitation and persistent sexual remarks are made in chat rooms, by instant message, or by email (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006: 158; Ybarra et al., 2007: S32). Some harassers wait in chat rooms and abuse their victims as soon as they appear online, or send pornographic pictures and spam (Philips and Morrissey, 2004: 67). Adam cites one case in which a perpetrator posted fake messages in his victim's name on various publicly accessible websites, included explicit sexual invitations, and provided her address and telephone number. Several men phoned this woman, and visited her house (Adam, 2002: 136). As this example shows, the internet can amplify existing modes of harassment and give them new form. Its highly networked nature allows 'third-party stalking' in ways not possible in the offline world. Online stalkers find it easier to remain anonymous, and they can be difficult to trace (Philips and Morrissey, 2004: 70). This is also highly gendered behaviour. Scholars argue that the majority of cyberstalkers are men, and most victims are women (Adam, 2002: 134). In a British survey from 1998, 41 percent of all female respondents had been sent pornographic material, or were harassed online (Gumbel, cited in Whitty, 2004: 51).

Sexual minorities, too, can be marginalized in cyberworlds. In the interstices of the internet, like the spaces of a town or city, heteronormative expressions reinforce the dominance of heterosexuality. Blogs, music clips, online media and social networking sites all provide vehicles for heterosexism and other forms of prejudice. At the same, though, online networks provide the means to organize resistance. Sites like 'sexualharassmentsupport.org' provide valuable advice and resources, while some Facebook users organize campaigns against inequalities of gender and sexuality. So too do the creators of, and participants in, a range of activist websites and online support networks.

Indeed, internet spaces constantly tack backwards and forwards between reinscribing inequalities and providing opportunities for resisting those same inequalities. Web interfaces can be deeply contradictory sites for power relations. For instance, the young heterosexual male chat room frequenters in one study positioned themselves both inside and outside dominant masculinities (Kendall, 2000). On the one hand they were 'nerds' who preferred technological pursuits to the physical activities traditionally associated with masculinity. On the other hand, they reiterated their identities as (heterosexual) men through frequent jokes and conversations depicting women as sexual objects (Kendall, 2000: 263–4). These men's online performance challenged established forms of masculine conduct in some respects, but in other ways they reinscribed gendered inequalities.

An analysis of black adolescent girls' home pages in the USA provides another example. Carla Stokes (2007) shows how these teenagers worked both with and against six sexual scripts 'with roots in controlling images of Black female sexuality': 'freaks', 'virgins', 'down-ass chicks/bitches', 'pimpettes' and 'resisters'. Many of these girls worked with more than one script at once. Some adopted the sexual expectations of the surrounding

culture, especially the hypersexualized and yet passive image of black women, while others deployed resistant representations of female sexuality as powerful, assertive and self-determining (Stokes, 2007: 179).

These instances prompt us to revisit a much-discussed suggestion: the possibility that the internet might help to erode – rather than reinforce – old hierarchies. The internet, some commentators have suggested, allows its subjects to experiment with socially transformative relations of gender and sexuality or, in Nyboe's words, to 'realise that gender is a slippery concept which needs to be reconsidered in the framework of cyberspace' (Nyboe, 2004: 79; see also Crampton, 2003: 7). The verdict, though, is generally pessimistic. As two researchers concluded, a 'boys' club locker room atmosphere' pervades many online spaces (McCormick and Leonard, 2004: 189). Where women do switch genders, this can be a strategy for avoiding online sexual harassment, not a gesture towards limitless gender and sexual fluidity (Roberts and Parks, 2001). In *Second Life*, it has been suggested, the bodies of female avatars are usually stereotypical in appearance and sexually subordinate to men, while female avatars that transgress or challenge traditional inequalities are rare (Brookey and Cannon, 2009: 149; O'Riordan, 2007: 26). Likewise, these authors argue, *Second Life* features few queer spaces, and those that do exist can be difficult to access.

Once again, online subjects draw upon the norms, practices and power relations that structure offline societies. While some of the spaces may be new, and novel networks allow for new modes of connectivity, old water flows just as easily through new pipes.

The power of synthesis

Some sociologists regard the internet as a new mode of communication and sociability, one that promises to fundamentally transform our society and our lives (Zhao, 2006: 459). More and more often, they suggest, sexual cultures are shaped by computer-mediated communication (Ross, 2005: 351). At the same time, though, internet researchers have under-theorized the forms that power takes on this new terrain. This is somewhat perplexing, given that considerations of power have long held an important place in social analysis (see Giddens, 1979; Lukes, 1974). Often the concept of power remains unnamed in internet research, represented instead by its technologies and effects: 'discipline', 'dominance' or 'harassment'. On the other hand, the terms with a more positive valence – 'pleasure', 'possibility' and 'freedom' – are disarticulated from power itself. We need to draw attention to power, name it as such, and examine its multiple dimensions and complexities.

Internet sexuality, I have suggested, involves a matrix of power whose strands or dimensions – the constitutive, the regulatory and the unequal – can be identified and tracked from instance to instance. As we do this, we can draw from a range of theorists of power, each of whom has their own point of focus. Foucault explores the constitutive and governmental aspects of power, Althusser the interpellative, symbolic interactionists the relational and feminist theorists spell out how inequalities are instantiated and sustained.

However, this is no either/or analysis, for power's strands overlap at many points. Foucault's concept of governmentality, for example, positions the subject as the 'contact point' between constitutive technologies of the self and the apparatus of disciplinary society (Crampton, 2003: 88). Those who engage in an online debate on sexual rights, for instance, constitute themselves as subjects who hold particular political positions, and

perhaps a specific sexual identity. At the same time, they are expected to obey the rules of conduct laid down for such interchanges. Those who breach the rules of the 'interaction order' – by advocating unsafe sex in a space where such expressions are taboo, for instance – transgress the prevailing customs, habits and mores demanded in that setting. The resulting labels – 'irresponsible' or 'ignorant'; 'misguided' or 'dangerous' – may well attach themselves to others' sense of the transgressor as a subject, and carry over into offline settings.

Regulatory power also intersects with the inequalities reproduced through offline and online spaces. As I have already intimated, home internet filters evoke these kinds of interplays. Those with the most authority are those most likely to control internet viewing in a household, and can use that authority to set and customize the filters. In the process, they regulate the viewing of others. These patterns of regulation draw upon the material relations of inequality already established in the household. University internet policies tie these knots in a rather different way. Most policies assert a university's authority over internet harassment and cyberstalking, and attempt to prevent users from harassing or vilifying other members of the university community.³ They assert a university's power to regulate internet use in order to mitigate inequalities. As these examples show, the overlaps between different forms of power can be complex and multi-directional.

The intersections between inequality, resistance and constitutive power come to the fore in work on gay and lesbian internet initiatives. Lillie suggests, for instance, that gay and lesbian pornographies resist and even challenge heteronormative power. In this view, they are expressions of gay and lesbian pride and precedence in a primarily heterosexual world. Online gay and lesbian erotica is an important resource for young people learning about their own sexuality, and these sites work to produce 'specific sexualities, desires and modes of pleasure' (Lillie, 2004: 52). Conversely, gay male chat room users assert a dominant masculinity in some respects, even as they resist heteronormativity. In bragging about their sexual prowess and telling 'conquest stories', gay participants replicate a key motif of heterosexual masculinity even as they challenge heterosexuality's precedence (Campbell, 2004: 64). In such settings, subordinate and dominant strands are caught up in a reflexive interplay.

On internet dating sites, constitutive and regulatory power moderates the creation and exercise of pleasure. There is enjoyment to be had in constructing and then reconstructing a dating profile, modifying a look and reinventing ourselves, as we plug into the panopticon or synopticon. As Ray writes, some women gain 'pride and self-esteem' from offering up their sexy photos and collating others' positive responses which, in turn, can be 'flattering and exciting' (2007: 58). No doubt the same can be said for many men.

Some internet users enjoy recording the sexual activities of themselves and their partners, and they post the results on publicly accessible sites like Xtube, Gaytube or YouPorn. Others create their own websites. 'Dawnmariesdream.com' offers up the sexual adventures of a 'real amateur redhead housewife and MILF next door' who shows herself having sex with her husband and other men (Ray, 2007: 147–9). While Dawn Marie publicly reconstitutes herself and her sexuality over and over, she also resists regulative aspects of power and pre-existing social inequalities. By announcing her precedence as a 'naughty all-natural housewife', embracing her true age of 44 and revealing that many men are unreliable – they agree to have sex with her only to lose their nerve – Dawn Marie resists the assumption

that female sexuality is the rightful domain of young, thin women who take their lead from men. In doing so, she reserves space for an active, desiring female sexuality that appears on its own terms.

All of these examples hint at the complexity of relations of looking, and the power relations that suffuse them. Our own domestic sexual entanglements – and Dawn Marie's too – dissolve into the world of commodities, to sit alongside the profusion of commercial erotica. Whether we post a profile on a dating site or a sex clip on Xtube, we produce and objectify ourselves simultaneously; we are the object of our own gaze and the gaze of others. Is this internet-based gaze a new take on voyeurism, perhaps, a new orientation to power? There is something about spectacle here, certainly, and questions of spectatorship are important: the internet provides a globally networked audience that offline worlds rarely do. While the internet may not displace inequality or varied modes of regulation, its 'interaction orders' do open up new spaces through which power and resistance can circulate.

We produce and reproduce ourselves in particular ways on the internet, in a forum that, while relatively new, is nevertheless anchored in the broader flow of social processes, inequalities and modes of regulation. The web is new in its technology and in some ways offers a 'richer palette of interactivity' than its predecessors (Briggle, 2008: 218). On the other hand, there is nothing new about some of its content, in political terms at least. The internet may sometimes allow a more fluid and transformative sexuality than was previously possible, but, then again, it may not. The online overlaps between objectification, resistance, organization, freedom, expression, isolation and inequality can be highly complex, and hard to disentangle. For all that, we can think carefully about power and sexuality, chart these complexities, and further consider technology's impact on our experience of sexual life.

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Notes

1. This suggests we revisit the suggestion that symbolic interactionist analyses ignore power (Musolf, 1992). When we examine power's multiple modalities, the contribution of symbolic interactionism becomes clearer.
2. In Marxist terms, this implies a refusal of 'commodity fetishism', where the mode of production is largely ignored in favour of a focus on the 'thingness' of a consumer item. Marxist theory applies particularly to the products of an industrial manufacturing process, but the criticism seems apposite here.
3. I consulted the internet access policies – online – for the following universities: Furman University (USA), Northeastern University (USA), Washington State University (USA) and Auckland University (New Zealand).

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Résumé

Internet rend les relations sexuelles de plus en plus possibles dans la société et en devient un médiateur. Il a commencé à transformer les modes anciens de connaissance, d'apprentissage et d'organisation de la sexualité. À la lumière d'une nouvelle littérature en sciences sociales, cet article analyse la sexualité médiée par internet et ses conséquences pour faire une théorie du pouvoir. Il considère trois modes idéal-typiques du pouvoir en relation avec la sexualité: le constitutif, le régulateur et l'inégal. Il prend en compte des discussions fondées sur des travaux empiriques aussi bien que des problèmes théoriques plus larges: les travaux de Foucault sur le discours et la subjectivité, le récit althusserien de l'interpellation, le regard de l'interactionnisme symbolique sur la présentation de soi et enfin les analyses féministes de l'inégalité. Cet article suggère que sur internet il y a une superposition souvent complexe et multidirectionnelle des différentes formes de pouvoir sexuel.

Mots-clés

Facebook, genre, internet, pouvoir, sexualité

Resumen

El internet es un cada vez mayor posibilitador y mediador de relaciones sexuales en la sociedad. Ha empezado a transformar modos anteriores de conocer, experimentar y organizar la sexualidad. A la luz de una literatura emergente de ciencia social, este artículo considera la sexualidad mediada por internet y sus consecuencias para teorizar el poder. Examina tres típicas corrientes ideales de poder en relación con la sexualidad: la constitutiva, la regulatoria, y la desigual. Considera discusiones de base empírica junto a intereses teóricos más amplios: el trabajo Foucauldiano sobre discurso y subjetividad,

y una explicación Althusseriana de la interpelación, el enfoque en interaccionismo simbólico en la auto-presentación, y análisis feministas de la desigualdad. En internet, sugiere el artículo, las coincidencias entre diferentes formas de poder sexual son frecuentemente complejas y multidireccionales.

Palabras clave

Facebook, género, internet, poder, sexualidad